

Correspondence Between Abigail Adams and John Adams

Read the following excerpts from the letters of Abigail and John Adams and answer the questions that follow.

Abigail Adams to John Adams

August 14, 1776

. . . . If you complain of neglect of Education in sons, What shall I say with regard to daughters, who every day experience the want of it. With regard to the Education of my own children, I find myself soon out of my depth, and destitute and deficient in every part of Education.

I most sincerely wish that some more liberal plan might be laid and executed for the Benefit of the rising Generation, and that our new constitution may be distinguished for Learning and Virtue. If we mean to have Heroes, Statesmen and Philosophers, we should have learned women. The world perhaps would laugh at me, and accuse me of vanity, But you I know have a mind too enlarged and liberal to disregard the Sentiment. If much depends as is allowed upon the early Education of youth and the first principals which are instilled take the deepest root, great benefit must arise from literary accomplishments in women. . . . ³

John Adams to Abigail Adams

August 25, 1776

. . . . Your Sentiments of the Importance of Education in Women, are exactly agreeable to my own. Yet the Femmes Scavans,⁴ are contemptible Characters. So is that of a Pedant, universally, how much soever of a male he may be. In reading History you will generally observe, when you light upon a great Character, whether a General, a Statesman, or a Philosopher, some female about him either in the Character of a Mother, Wife, or Sister, who has Knowledge and Ambition above the ordinary Level of Women, and that much of his Eminence is owing to her Precepts, Example, or Instigation, in some shape or other. . . . ⁵

³L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Adams Family Correspondence*, vol. 2, June 1776-March 1778 (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963, 93-94.

⁴Most likely a play on words on *Femmes Savant* (a woman of learning) as a way of expressing displeasure with women who make a show of their learning.

⁵Butterfield, *Adams Family Correspondence*, vol. 2, 109-10.

Abigail Adams to John Thaxter

Braintree Febry 15, 1778

. . . . It gives me pleasure to see so distinguished a Genius as Mrs. Macaulay⁶ Honour'd with a Statue, yet she wanted it not to render her Name immortal. The Gentleman who erected it has sullied the glory of his deed by the narrow contracted Spirit which he discovers in the inscription, . . .⁷ Even the most Excellent monody⁸ which he wrote upon the Death of his Lady will not atone for a mind contracted enough to wish that but one woman in an age might excell, and she only for the sake of a prodigy. What must be that Genius which cannot do justice to one Lady, but at the expence of the whole Sex?

It is really mortifying Sir, when a woman possess'd of a common share of understanding considers the difference of Education between the male and female Sex, even in those families where Education is attended too. Every assistance and advantage which can be procured is afforded to the sons, whilst the daughters are totally neglected in point of Literature. Writing and Arithmetick comprise all of their Learning. Why should children of the same parents be thus distinguished? Why should the Females who have a part to act upon the great Theater, and a part not less important to Society, (as the care of a family and the first instruction of Children falls to their share, and if as we are told that the first impressions are most durable), is it not of great importance that those who are to instill the first principals should be suiteably qualified for the Trust, Especially when we consider that families compose communities, and individuals make up the sum total. Nay why should your sex wish for such a disparity in those whom they one day intend for companions and associates. Pardon me Sir if I cannot help sometimes suspecting that this Neglect arises in some measure from an ungenerous jealousy of rivals near the Throne—but I quit the Subject or it will run away with my pen.⁹

⁶Catherine Sawbridge Macaulay wrote a multivolume history that was admired by Abigail Adams. See **Handout 19**, letter to Issac Smith Jr. of April 20, 1771.

⁷"and once in every Age I could wish such a Woman to appear, as a proof that Genius is not confined to Sex; but at the same time—you will pardon me—We want no more than One Mrs. Macaulay."

⁸a mournful lament or dirge

⁹Butterfield, *Adams Family Correspondence*, vol. 2, 39–92.

Name _____

Date _____

1. Based on these three letters, describe the education of children during Abigail Adams's times.

2. What are the two main reasons that Abigail Adams gives for improving the education of women?

3. What reason is given by Abigail Adams as a possible reason why men would not want women to be educated?

4. Based on the letter of August 25, 1776, explain your reasons for believing that John Adams either favored or opposed improving education for women.

5. What do Abigail Adams's comments on women's education reveal about the general role of women in the late eighteenth century?

The Adams Correspondence on Women's Rights

Read the following excerpts from the letters of Abigail and John Adams and answer the questions that follow.

Abigail Adams to Issac Smith Jr.

Braintree April the 20 1771

. . . . From my Infancy I have always felt a great inclination to visit the Mother Country as tis call'd and had nature formed me of the other Sex, I should certainly have been a rover. . . .

Women you know Sir are considerd as Domestick Beings, and altho they inherit an Eaquel Share of curiosity with the other Sex, yet but few are hardy eno' to venture abroad, and explore the amaizing variety of distant Lands. The Natural tenderness and Delicacy of our Constitutions, added to the many Dangers we are subject too from your Sex, renders it almost impossible for a Single Lady to travel without injury to her character. . . . To your Sex we are most of us indebted for all the knowledg [sic] we acquire of Distant lands. . . .

I have a great desire to be made acquainted with Mrs. Maccaulays own history. One of my own Sex so eminent in a tract so uncommon naturally raises my curiosity and all I could ever learn relative to her, is this that she is a widdow Lady and Sister to Mr. Sawbridge. I have a curiosity to know her Education, and what first prompted her to engage in a Study never before Exhibited to the publick by one of her own Sex and Country, tho now to the honour of both so admirably performed by her. . . . ¹⁰

Abigail Adams to John Adams

Braintree March 31 1776

. . . . I long to hear that you have declared an independancy—and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your Sex. Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and in imitation of the Supreem Being make use of that power only for our happiness.¹¹

¹⁰L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Adams Family Correspondence*, vol. 1, December, 1761-May 1776 (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), 76-77.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 369-70.

John Adams to Abigail Adams

Ap. 14. 1776

... As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient—that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent—that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented.—This is rather too coarse a Compliment but you are so saucy, I wont blot it out.

Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude. We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in Practice you know We are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would compleatly subject Us to the Despotism of the Peticoat, I hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight. I am sure every good Politician would plot, as long as he would against Despotism, Empire, Monarchy, Aristocracy, Oligarchy, or Ochlocracy.—A fine Story indeed. I begin to think the Ministry as deep as they are wicked. After stirring up Tories, Landjobbers, Trimmers, Bigots, Canadians, Indians, Negroes, Hanoverians, Hessians, Russians, Irish Roman Catholicks, Scotch Renegadoes, at last they have stimulated them to demand new Priviledges and threaten to rebell.¹²

Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren

Braintree April 27 1776

... He is very sausy to me in return for a List of Female Grievances which I transmitted to him. I think I will get you to join me in a petition to Congress. ... I ventured to speak a word in behalf of our Sex, who are rather hardly dealt with by the Laws of England which gives such unlimited power to the Husband to use his wife ill.

I requested that our Legislators would consider our case and as all Men of Delicacy and Sentiment are averse to Exercising the power they possess, yet as there is a natural propensity in Humane Nature to domination, I thought the most generous plan was to put it out of the power of the Arbitrary and tyranick to injure us with impunity by Establishing some Laws in our favour upon just and Liberal principals.

I believe I even threatned fomenting a Rebellion in case we were not considerd, and assured him we would not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we had neither a voice, nor representation.

In return he tells me he cannot but Laugh at My Extrodonary Code of Laws. That he had heard their Struggle had loosned the bands of Government, that children and apprentices were dissabedient, that Schools and Colledges were grown turbulent, that Indians slighted their Guardians, and Negroes

¹²Butterfield, *Adams Family Correspondence*, vol. 1, 369-70.

Name _____

Date _____

grew insolent to their Masters. But my Letter was the first intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented. This is rather too coarse a complement, he adds, but that I am so sausy he wont blot it out.

So I have help'd the Sex abundantly, but I will tell him I have only been making trial of the Disinterestedness of his Virtue, and when weigh'd in the balance have found it wanting.

It would be bad policy to grant us greater power say they since under all the disadvantages we Labour we have the assendancy over their Hearts

And charm by accepting, but submitting sway. . . .¹³

Abigail Adams to John Adams

B[raintree] May 7 1776

. . . I can not say that I think you very generous to the Ladies, for whilst you are proclaiming peace and good will to Men, Emancipating all Nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over Wives. But you must remember that Arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken —and notwithstanding all your wise Laws and Maxims we have it in our power not only to free ourselves but to subdue our Masters, and without violence throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet—

"Charm by accepting, by submitting sway

Yet have our Humour most when we obey". . . .¹⁴

John Adams to James Sullivan

Philadelphia May. 26. 1776

. . . It is certain in Theory, that the only moral Foundation of Government is the Consent of the People. But to what an Extent Shall We carry this Principle? Shall We Say, that every Individual of the Community, old and young, male and female, as well as rich and poor, must consent, expressly to every Act of Legislation? No, you will Say. This is impossible. How then does the Right arise in the Majority to govern the Minority, against their Will? Whence arises the Right of the Men to govern Women, without their Consent? . . .

But why exclude Women? You will Say, because their Delicacy renders them unfit for Practice and Experience, in the great Business of Life, and the hardy Enterprizes of War, as well as the arduous Cares of State. Besides, their attention is So much engaged with the necessary Nurture of their Children, that Nature has made them fittest for domestic Cares. . . .

The Same Reasoning, which will induce you to admit all Men, who have no Property, to vote, with those who have, for those Laws, which affect the

¹³Butterfield, *Adams Family Correspondence*, vol. 1, 396-98.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 401-03.

Person will prove that you ought to admit Women . . . for generally Speaking, Women . . . have as good Judgment, and as independent Minds as those Men who are wholly destitute of Property: these last being to all Intents and Purposes as much dependent upon others . . . as Women are upon their Husbands. . . .¹⁵

John Adams to Abigail Adams

Passy Feb. 13, 1779

My dearest Friend

. . . . I must not write a Word to you about Politicks, because you are a Woman.

What an offence have I committed?—a Woman!

I shall soon make it up. I think Women better than Men in General, and I know that you can keep a Secret as well as any Man whatever. But the World dont know this. Therefore if I were to write any Secrets to you and the letter should be caught, and hitched into a Newspaper, the World would say, I was not to be trusted with a Secret.¹⁶

1. What picture of women does Abigail Adams present in her letter of April 20, 1771?

2. In her letter of March 31, 1776, what does Abigail Adams say about the following?
 - a. what she wants from John Adams and why

 - b. the relationship between men and women

¹⁵Robert J. Taylor, ed. *Papers of John Adams*, vol. 4 (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 208-11.

¹⁶L. H. Butterfield and Marc Friedlaender, eds., *Adams Family Correspondence*, vol. 3, April 1778-September 1780, (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1973), 169-70.

Name _____

Date _____

3. In his letter of April 14, 1776, how does John Adams respond to Abigail Adams's request of March 31, 1776?

4. What assessment did John Adams give of Abigail Adams's threat of a rebellion by women?

5. In her letter of April 27, 1776, why did Abigail Adams tell Mercy Otis Warren she had "helped" her sex? What did she say she was going to tell her husband about his reply to her letter of March 31, 1776?

6. In her letter of May 7, 1776, to John Adams, what did Abigail Adams tell her husband about his reply to her letter of March 31, 1776?

7. In his letter of May 26, 1776, what conclusions does John Adams state about women's political rights?

8. In his letter of February 3, 1779, why does John Adams say he can't discuss politics with Abigail Adams?